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Improving Student Learning Conference 2004: Diversity and Inclusivity
Building success for all our students: Enhancing the first year student experience
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Keywords: First year experience, retention, diversity, academic experience

Abstract

This paper focuses upon Middlesex University's response (ISLER Project) to concerns regarding the widening participation agendas' implication on retention. On-going institutional research in the form of the ISLER Project (Impact of the student learning experience on retention) has been instigated, to better understand the issues that affect our first year students, in particular *academic* related factors which contribute to student departure and/or persistence. Findings illustrated reasons for non-completion often consisted of a mixture of academic related factors coupled with factors external to academic issues. Factors influential to student departure included academic preparedness, staff/student and peer relationships, students' concerns regarding aspects of learning and teaching. Factors that fostered persistence included institutional aspects of adopting active learning techniques, formative assessments, regular feedback, adopted techniques to make students feel a sense of belonging to the university and course, tied with personal traits of investment, self efficacy beliefs and motivation.

Context

University places have ceased to be preserved for the elite resulting in a proliferation of student backgrounds and needs. This has implications for the retention and progression of students sector wide and particularly at institutional level due to the considerable differences in student make up of HEI's (Cole, 1997). Although the government is pushing institutions to focus on retention issues, (Education and Employment, Seventh Special Report, 2001) nationally the statistics illustrate that the U.K. has one of the highest retention rates at 17% (Sixth Report).

The profile of student retention has had a considerable presence in UK higher education with much of the discussion centred on the changes within the landscape and the implications. A considerable number of these discussions have included the growing numbers, and therefore diversity, of the student body (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997), the government directives to build a more inclusive sector and its implications for HE (Morgan & Lister, 2003), the restructuring of funding and the concern for standards within higher education (as Badden describes, THES, 2004).

Findings

Withdrawal factors

Although the focus of the research concerned the academic experiences it became apparent that these experiences were intertwined with factors external to purely academic factors and rarely could the reasons for withdrawal be contained to just one factor (Ltsn briefing note). It is also noted that rather than attending one week and withdrawing the next, the students appeared to go through 'detachment

stages' (Noble & Thomas, 2004) before withdrawing, whereby their attendance would steadily decrease.

Although statistically, in terms of the withdrawal data held as an institution, academic factors are seen to be fairly insignificant with ambiguous reasons of 'personal' and 'other' taking prominence this research illustrated that academic related factors were indeed masked.

Learning and teaching experience

A number of participants clearly blamed dissatisfaction with aspects of teaching and learning for their withdrawal. Adapting to new teaching methods, learning environment and the emphasis on autonomous learning were often cited as influential factors. A great emphasis was placed upon the student/tutor relationship with staff friendliness, responsiveness and attitude to be an influence when reflecting upon their student experience. Also a personal tutor system seemed to be preferred by many of the non-completers that were interviewed with concerns emerging about not having someone who knows the university and academic process there to oversee their learning and progress. Although for some this approach is fine it relies upon those that are experiencing difficulties to ask for help and therefore the non-personal tutor system of Middlesex was deemed unhelpful by the student. In this sense some of the participants attributed this to be a key influential factor to their withdrawal as going to support services was viewed as explicitly 'asking for help', whereas an informal chat with a tutor was viewed as an implicit pathway to the help. Particularly for those students who were concerned about their progress personal tutors were seen to be a way of someone concerned about their progress and learning in order to 'note if I'm on the right track' and to see if 'I'm learning what I'm supposed to be learning'.

The curriculum design was also an area, which appeared to cause concerns and problems, particularly for those students new to higher education and returning into education after a period of time out. Undertaking three modules within a twelve-week period with assessments within much of the same phase appeared to be detrimental to the learning and reflection process. This comment typifies these views:

I thought higher education was about your development, intellectually, to construct arguments, have peers challenge your ideas, debate, discuss...with this set-up there is no time for reflection and for me a lot of the learning is in the reflection, having the time to reflect...teaching time and assessments are split it feels as if you're on a factory conveyor belt. Alan –student that withdrew

This participant expressed other feelings associated with 'conveyor belt learning' that were also common among other participants' experiences of discontentment with the academic experience. These included learning driven primarily by assessments/grades and learning in isolation with little transferability from module to module.

Workload and timetabled lessons were also seen as a factor in withdrawal. This was an issue that appeared to cause a knock-on effect to other influential factors which could then spiral to lead to withdrawal, for example not successfully managing the workload or the workload excessively interfering with paid employment or the social experience could result in a lack of integration with peers and isolation or could therefore fall behind, etc. Workload was also seen to be a problem when it was considered too little in terms of the academic rigour of the course and therefore affecting their reputation of the institution.

I've looked at the course Im doing at another institution [names institution] and that had far more hours per week and the work we'd have had to do was far more. It just seems better, preparing you for more by teaching you more. Im starting there next September. Sophie –student that withdrew

Assessment and feedback were also topics that appear to have a degree of influence on student departure (Ltsn Newsletter, September 2003). Concerns were expressed regarding a lack of clarity of the level of expectation within HE, what the assessments were actually asking of them and the difference between the grading criteria. Views on feedback centred around the complaint of lack of useful feedback, the timeliness of feedback and the merger of verbal and written feedback. These comments are a selection of views expressed by participants that had withdrawn and illustrate the depth and range of concerns within a similar sphere of assessment, grading and feedback.

I don't even know what the difference between a 6 and a 9 is! [Internal grading classification ...I need to see good work to know how to achieve it. Katie – student that withdrew

This next section aims to explore the sources uses in helping students to persist, from students that have successfully progressed themselves.

Learning from persisters

As mentioned earlier we are becoming more aware of the influences of withdrawal (Yorke, 2000, Bennett, 2003) but what can we learn from persisters? The clearest thing emerged from interviews with this group is that those that persist do not do so purely due to the experience they have – students that persist are just as likely to have encountered great difficulties and have more than likely thought about quitting. If many of these persisters have also experienced the same or similar problems to those that have withdrawn what influences helped these students to remain? These findings have been divided into the following sub-headings: commitment/motivation and learning/teaching.

Commitment and motivation

Research has concluded that commitment and motivation to a course or institution is a strong reason for persistence (Mackie, 1998, Bennett, 2003). This research supports this view and further suggests that a clearer direction of goals, particularly career orientation appears to be a key motivator in persistence. Many of those that has successfully progressed onto level two had strong motivations for gaining their intended degree, for some it included career goals others felt a degree would better equip them for a career but were less focused on the field.

Im not entirely sure what career path I want to follow when I finish here but Im sure having a degree will widen my horizons in a number of ways. Tessa – student that remained

Thus the value that has been placed upon a degree has justified commitment from the participant due to the assumption of its future merit, warranting deferring gratification for future orientated goals.

This ties in with thoughts of investment, whereby persisted are encouraged to remain and overcome difficulties due to their personal, social, financial, emotional and mental investment in applying, accepting and undertaking a place within HE.

I feel as like Ive got this far so Ive got to carry on. I got in didn't I? Course Im gonna stay. Tom – student that remained

My family are so proud of me I wouldn't want to let them down. Ive thought about it but everyone does. Ali – student that remained

These persisters participating in this research also appeared to exhibit a more realistic, balanced view of student life, admitting '*its not all it's cracked up to be*' but externalising the concerns through seeking support from the institutions support services, peers, family or even out loud to put their concerns into perspective and seek option. There was also a greater sense of belonging

Learning and teaching

At the center of this research aspects of learning and teaching have featured strongly throughout and continue to do so. These findings, in agreement with Tinto's views (2003) suggest that students have the greater likelihood of persisting if they are in an environment that fosters learning. This would seem likely as we would expect the majority of students to be in higher education to develop their education to a 'higher level' and therefore 'students who learn are students who stay' (2003:3). It was also clear to see that those that had remained were on programmes that actively encouraged and employed techniques, persuading student to remaining through learning. These programmes often utilized active teaching techniques, balancing traditional lectures with smaller teaching classes and incorporated more formative assessments.

These students appeared to view themselves at the center of their learning rather than viewing the tutor to be at the center or 'in charge' of their learning. These participants took far more responsibility for their learning, understanding the importance of autonomous learning.

I understand that this [university] isn't like college. You've got to want to do the work and motivate yourself. You don't have people nagging you here so you've got to motivate yourself to work...to prove to yourself you can do it. – R3

The students participating in this research that had remained also appeared to have a more realistic understanding of why they had the grades they had attained. The locus of control appeared to be embedded within, with students taking responsibility for their learning outcomes. Of those students that had persisted typical comments of the grades they had received included:

I deserved that mark because I studied for weeks and weeks.

Ive only got myself to blame for failing [says modules name]. Now Ive learnt that you really do have to work all the way through not just at the end!

Although these are not perhaps just the positive comments expressed by those that persist, it does demonstrate that those who remain do experience difficulties and have to work through problems yet internalised the control to themselves.

Concluding remarks

Although this research had intended to focus purely upon the academic issues influencing student withdrawal, early on it became evident that other factors had to be acknowledged. Although academic related factors were, and are, an important factor within first year withdrawal often

academic issues are coupled with institutional, social, emotional and personal factors, creating a complex, intricate web leading to the students' departure. Key factors appeared to be administrative issues, concerns regarding learning and teaching, whether support was sought/experienced, academic staff/student and peer relationships and academic preparedness coupled with motivation and determination. Motivation and commitment were also seen as key factors in students persisting. However, it is often assumed that our students are driven by learning. Motivation to learn may be the case for a proportion but for some it is clearly a means to an end, rather than intellectually driven (Wightman & Simpson, 2002).

It is clear from these findings that some of these factors have been previously identified as possibly contributing to student withdrawal (for example commitment and motivation, Mackie, 1998, active learning methods Tinto, 2003, notion of 'detached student', Noble & Thomas, 2004). To some extent we would have expected to have some overlap in findings but other influences appeared to be particular to Middlesex University, or possibly to other modern city based universities of similar size and socio-geodemographics. These cover issues such as commuting and self-efficacy beliefs. A significant proportion of our students commute across London citing the frustration and expense, coupled with the students timetable can often snowball into a major influence for withdrawal. A lack of academic belief or as Dweck (1999) describes, self-efficacy beliefs, also appeared to be a large influence of our students. This could possibly be due to the students perception of either, themselves and/or the institution, with the value of them gaining entry into HE and the institution itself undervalued. In addition to this the lack of belief in their educational attainment could also be due to the make-up of students within Middlesex University as discussed previously (see institutional profile).

It was clear from the findings that the extent of academic factors influencing withdrawal is masked within the institutional statistics of withdrawal. Although students expressed academic concerns within the interviews they were less likely to put academic reasons as their primary reason for withdrawal. From speaking to the students about this it appeared that this was due to partly embarrassment of the thought of 'not coping' and partly due to only being able to select one reason for withdrawal, hence the majority of students pulled together their reasons under the umbrella of 'other'. This does little to inform the institution whilst further masks the academic difficulties the students experience.

The research also highlighted for me the disappointment the majority of participants that departed expressed of their withdrawal highlighting the point that it was often a difficult and considered decision as Sir Howard Newby (Sixth Report) emphasises '*withdrawing, on the whole is a setback, if not a tragedy for the student*'. The research also discovered that from these students that had departed many saw participating in the research as a route of re-entry into the university. Withdrawal from the university for a period of time appeared to be the best action for some in order for them to have a period of reflection and insight into the setting that they are entering and the experience they want. This in itself emphasises the importance of strong links and guidance with the students after departure in order that they are aware of the opportunities of re-entry after a period out of the university.

Issues of support were also heavy influences on departure in a number of ways. The word 'support' was used frequently by students in various contexts but the meanings associated with support tended to range from guidance to mentoring to 1 x 1 support. The level of support that is expected by the students and issued by the institution is something that is needed to be explicit in order for both parties to be clear about what is expected and required. However, coupled with this is the stigma

attached to asking for 'support'. In asking for support and guidance some students perceived themselves to be inadequate in coping with the demands of higher education and therefore in resisting to fall into this category, differed asking for help and consequently withdrew. This implies that the routes of support need to be more in built so that the perception of 'asking for help' is eliminated.

Some of the issues commented upon by the students, that affected their withdrawal, can be argued to be embedded within the workings of the institution. Thomas (2002) talks of the 'institutional habitus' the culture of the institution, sub consciously reaffirming values of the dominant habitus. The middle class in this sector are therefore seen to be at an advantage, with non-traditional students penalised, Thomas therefore arguing that the habitus of higher education is in favour of the traditional homogenise group. Thomas suggests that we need to look at the culture and foundations of the institution, to question the extent of implicit knowledge expected from our students (for discussions of class and education see Bourdieu).

Widening participation naturally means a considerable increase in difference among the student body but it does not necessarily have to mean drop in retention. The institutional habitus of the university is therefore a influence in this matter as the ex-Secretary of State for Education indicates, "*There is evidence to show that there are unacceptable variations in the rate of 'drop-out' which appear to be linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than to the background or nature of the students recruited*" (cited in Thomas, 2002). However, since its establishment as a HE provider Middlesex University has excelled in creating a university for all, a proliferation of backgrounds, entering with varying academic grades and expectations. Missions of access and diversity are encouraged. Enhancing the student experience, particularly the student learning experience is a priority. The culture and ethos of Middlesex University has centred on the inclusion of diversity and has embedding this into the institutional culture. Although this institution can clearly be seen to be building a habitus based upon the wider student body, it can be argued the ties and traditions of the higher education sector are within the middle class values and therefore institutions are bound, to some degree, within a larger setting.

As an institution Middlesex University is responding to the complexities of student withdrawal at different levels, with retention issues at the core of strategic aims of the university (i.e. learning and teaching committee- former retention and progression committee, all formative assessments at level 1, internal conferences focusing upon themes of the LT&A strategy) to localised research (mini-bids and small projects funded through the LT&A strategy). This research has a strong place in this mission and aims to be ongoing, to build a body of knowledge surrounding issues of the first year experience and retention and to make practical recommendations. It is also crucial to re-evaluate the way in which we perceive retention and success, as expressing students progression in HE as a percentage is to say at the least misleading, in implying that 100% is attainable (Brennan, 2001). Is it therefore realistic to measure retention in terms of something unobtainable and probably unwanted?

As this research and others have shown (Yorke, 1999, Hall, 2001) retention is clearly not the results of simply one or two factors but rather a 'reflection of the conditions in which the students find themselves' (Tinto, 2003). Challenges for institutions are therefore to promote university wide retention thinking, embedded into university culture and curricular without increasing staff workload. Also ensuring internal research is disseminated among university wide staff members rather than to particular departments to promote a joined up, inter-linking approach to enhancing the student experience. Possibly part of the greatest action an institution can take it to continue to build on the body of research. As Johnston says, improve retention by design, not by accident (2002).

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